

## Setting Up the Physical Environment

### POLICY:

The indoor and outdoor classroom environment will foster optimal growth in school readiness and promote development of the child as a whole.

*This policy relates to [Head Start Performance Standards 45 CFR Part 1302.31, 1302.47](#)*

### PROCEDURE:

1. Ensure indoor and outdoor spaces are safe, clean, spacious and attractive at all times.
2. Determine activity areas and make sure they are clearly defined while allowing children to work individually or together in small or large groups. Arrange space to provide clear pathways for children to move from one area to another and to minimize distractions.
3. Create a Helpers/Jobs Chart and designate roles for the children to do each day or week (*i.e. weather person, door holder, line leader, etc.*). If possible, make enough jobs so that each child has one daily/weekly but at a minimum, at least half of the kids should have an assigned job.
4. The Fairness Chart should be used to assist in assigning jobs for children.
5. The classroom should not have loud background noise that takes away from the children's ability to learn. Background music should not be played except for designated music/group time or at rest time. Ensure that air conditioning, heating units, etc. are not loud enough that voices of adults and children must be raised to communicate.
6. Adapt and modify space for special needs (wheelchairs, other adaptive equipment/materials).
7. The classroom must have at least 9 specific learning centers covering block building, dramatic play, experiences in art, fine motor/manipulatives, music/movement, science, computers/tablet/Smartboard, writing, and quiet book reading.

8. There are six (6) centers that must be “Stationary” meaning they are not moved during the day to different locations or only brought out during center time. These 6 centers are: Blocks, Art, Fine Motor, Library, Dramatic Play, and Science. These learning centers should be set up in the following manner:

**a. Block Area**

- i. Must be enclosed on 3 sides so that there is only one way into the center in order to minimize outside interruptions and foot traffic
- ii. The block area should have a flat, solid surface for building while also giving the children a comfortable place to sit on the floor such as a thin rug
- iii. There must be enough wooden unit blocks for at least 2 children to build independent structures
- iv. **There must be 2 different kinds of blocks in the center**
- v. There must be enough total blocks for 3 children to build independent structures
- vi. Should have some accessories (people, road signs, cars, animals, small buildings, etc.) that can be used to enhance block play
- vii. Blocks must be separated by type (wooden vs foam)
- viii. **In order to assist children with self-help skills, wooden blocks should be placed on labeled shelves (not in bins) and organized by size and shape.**
- ix. Legos, Lincoln Logs, interlocking blocks, doll houses, and large barns should not be stored in the block area
- x. The block area should be one of the two biggest centers in the room along with the dramatic play area

**b. Art Area**

- i. Should be the closest center to the water supply since there will always be a lot of mess
- ii. The center must provide a variety of materials to children such as crayons, markers, paint, play dough, yarn, stencils, scissors, tape, glue, stampers, etc.
- iii. Materials should be arranged so that children can use them with minimal assistance from adults
- iv. Must have a table near the area for children to use while creating
- v. There should be an art easel within the area
- vi. Smocks should be available for children to wear while they are creating, especially when using paint. There should be at least as many smocks as there are children allowed to play in the center at the same time

**c. Fine Motor/Manipulatives Area**

- i. Should be several different types of fine motor materials in this center including those that snap, connect, stack, etc.
- ii. The materials should vary in difficulty to address the needs of all children. Some examples are regular and knobbed puzzles, larger and smaller interlocking blocks, smaller and larger stringing beads, etc.

- iii. Most fine motor materials should be stored in bins (without lids) and both the shelf and bins should be labeled with pictures and words to help the children with organizational skills, clean-up, and literacy skills
- iv. A table should be in or near the fine motor area so children can play with the materials comfortably

**d. Library Area**

- i. Must be enclosed on 3 sides so that there is only one way into the center in order to minimize outside interruptions and foot traffic
- ii. Should be a quiet, comfortable area with soft furnishings for children to relax. Soft furnishings could include a couch, chair, bean bag, pillows, etc.
- iii. The library area should have at least 35 books accessible for children with many of them facing forward so the cover can be seen
- iv. Books in the library area should be age appropriate, in good condition, and cover a variety of topics such as differing abilities, cultures, health, jobs/work, math, people, nature/science, etc.
- v. There should be at least **3-5 books** displayed in the room (doesn't have to be in the library area) that relate to the current classroom theme.

**e. Dramatic Play Area**

- i. There should be a variety of dramatic play materials accessible such as dolls, child-sized furniture, play foods, cooking utensils, dress-up clothes for boys and girls, stuffed animals, camping supplies, mailbox, restaurant menus, doctor tools, play money, etc.
- ii. There should be at least 4 examples to represent diversity in the dramatic play area such as dolls of different races, foods of different cultures, equipment used by people with disabilities, etc.
- iii. The dramatic play area should be one of the two biggest centers in the room along with the block area
- iv. The dramatic play area can be altered to address the interests of the children and does not have to just be a "kitchen" area
- v. There should be 2-3 gender specific dress-up clothes for both men and women such as dresses and purses for women, ties and boots for men.

**f. Science Area**

- i. The science center cannot be labeled "Science/Math". Math should be evident in all centers and is not solely combined with science and cannot be labeled as such
- ii. There should be a variety of science materials accessible from 5 specific categories:
  - a) Living Things such as ant farms, class pet, plants, window bird feeder, etc.
  - b) Natural Objects such as a bird's nest, seeds, leaves, pine cones, rocks, seashells, etc.

- c) Factual Books/Science Picture Games such as books, board games, matching games, plastic animals, etc.
    - d) Nature/Science Tools such as binoculars, color paddles, magnets, magnifying glasses, prisms, smelling cans, tornado tubes, etc.
    - e) Sand/Water Table with toys such as funnels, measuring cups, sand molds, scoops, sifters, bowls, etc.
  - iii. A sand/water table with toys must be accessible for children during each indoor free play period, but it does not have to be attached to the science area
  - iv. Sand substitutes such as seeds, aquarium pebbles, etc. can be used in the table
    - v. Inappropriate sand substitutes would be gravels, styrofoam, leaves, buttons, rice, beans, or any food product.
  - vi. The sand/water table should have many different toys available to dig, pour, measure, etc.
  - vii. It is encouraged, but not required, that each classroom have a living thing such as a classroom pet or a plant so the children have the opportunity to help take care of it
  - viii. If there is a plant in the classroom, it must be labeled with the name of the plant and information that proves it is not poisonous
9. In addition to the stationary learning centers mentioned above, each classroom must have learning centers for music/movement, writing, and computers/tablet/Smartboard. These 3 additional centers can be stationary, but they can also be mobile centers that are only created during free play time. These learning centers should be set up in the following manner:
- a. Music Area**
    - i. There should be at least 10 musical instruments of different types available for children during free play such as bells, rhythm sticks, maracas, drums, shakers, tambourines, rain sticks, etc.
    - ii. If musical instruments are used at group time, there must be enough for 1 per child participating
    - iii. The music area and instruments must be available for at least 1 hour during free play periods
  - b. Writing Area**
    - i. This area can be placed at a table during free play or it can be a permanent interest area
    - ii. There should be various types of writing materials in this area such as markers, crayons, pencils, stencils, lined paper, blank paper, construction paper, journals, tracing cards, etc.
    - iii. The area should contain items that encourage the child's interest in learning to write alphabet letters such as a book with names of the children, alphabet in plain view, animal picture cards with names, dry erase word cards, etc.
  - c. Computers/Tablet/Smartboard**

- i. There should be an area of technology within the classroom where children can play interactive learning games
  - ii. Each classroom must have either a desktop computer for child use, a smartboard, or an interactive computer tablet available during free play
  - iii. A timer must be used in this interest area to assure that no child has more than 15 minutes of media time, per day
  
10. Create a space for child privacy so 1 or 2 children can play alone without expected interruptions. This space should be available during free play and placed in a quiet area where there is not usually a lot of classroom activity. Some examples of a “space for privacy” would be a writing center, a private game that has been set up by the teacher, an interest area with a sign that only allows 1-2 children at a time, etc. The computer area will not be viewed as a space for privacy because children can only stay at the computer for 15 minutes and the space for privacy should not have a time limit.
  
11. Space should include soft elements such as rugs, cushions, or rocking chairs. Use sound absorbing materials to cut down on excessive noise whenever possible.
  
12. Develop a cozy area in the classroom with soft furnishings that will allow children to COMPLETELY escape the hardness of the room. This may or may not be your Library/Reading area.
  
13. Arrange developmentally appropriate materials and equipment on low, open shelves to promote accessibility and independent use by children. Ensure a sufficient quantity of a durable materials and equipment. Rotate and adapt materials, change learning centers to maintain children’s interest and extend their experiences.
  
14. Check that the environment reflects non-stereotyping and cultural diversity. Reflect the backgrounds and interests of families and children represented in the classroom in pictures, photographs and materials displayed and used in activities.
  
15. The “*Required Classroom Display*” document identifies several items that must be posted inside or outside the classroom. In addition to those required items, the display should be used to enhance the child’s environment and promote learning such as literacy and math skills.
  
16. The weekly theme/topic should be evident in the classroom display.
  
17. Photos and names of the enrolled children should be found in multiple places throughout the room. Examples would be: Their cubbies, tables, charts, child identifiers for center selection (i.e. pictures on ice cream sticks), bulletin boards, birthday displays, writing center, etc.

18. About 1/3 of the display materials should be children's individualized artwork.
19. Use signs and pictures in each interest area of the classroom to help volunteers know what skills children can learn and how to facilitate activities in each area.
20. Separate the location of the learning centers that are "quiet" from the ones that are "noisy". This can be done by having them on opposite sides of the classroom or by placing a "buffer" center between them. Centers should be viewed as quiet, noisy, or a buffer based on the information below:
  - **Quiet Centers:** Library, Writing, Listening
  - **Buffer Centers:** Computers, Science, Fine Motor, Math, Art
  - **Noisy Centers:** Dramatic Play, Blocks, Musical Instruments, Music Without Headphones
21. Provide individual spaces for children to hang their clothing and store their personal belongings. Children's belongings should not be touching while stored in their individual areas.
22. Arrange a parent bulletin board and message center that is regularly updated with attractive displays, interesting articles and announcements of activities and events of the program, center and community. *Refer to "Required Classroom Display" document for guidance.*
23. Provide a safe, well-organized outdoor play area which includes a variety of surfaces, equipment and materials for large muscle play and space for activities such as painting, and water play.
24. Ensure outdoor areas are protected by fencing or natural barriers from access to roadway/streets, parking lots and/or other dangers.

*Approved by the Policy Council: August 2021*